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ABSTRACT

When evaluating the work of congenitally deaf students whose native language is spatial and semiotic, composition teachers must avoid being what Marjorie Siegel calls "verbocentric," since congenitally deaf students are, in effect, learning to write in a language completely foreign to them in structure, syntax, and grammar. The compositions of deaf students repeat specific erroneous structural patterns, because the students are, in fact, writing spatially rather than structurally. Several methods have been used, with varying degrees of success, to teach English speech, reading, and composition to native signers of American Sign Language (ASL): (1) fingerspelling or dactylology; (2) cued speech; (3) manually coded English; (4) simultaneous communication; and (5) signing exact English. These methods all share the common prejudice of treating ASL as a type of substandard English rather than as a linguistically sound and logical language in its own right. This is being remedied, however; in 1989, the Modern Language Association recognized ASL as an official language, and researchers at Gallaudet University are developing computer software which will provide grammar checks and automatic sentence parsing based on the differences between ASL syntax and English grammar. This new awareness of ASL reflects a trend toward interdisciplinary study and creates a vast number of possibilities for scholarship and discovery. Most importantly, it allows the expression of a long-silent minority. (Twenty-one references and suggestions for additional reading are included.) (PRA)

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Hear Together Eyes; Write Together Heart:

**American Sign Language in the (Verbocentric) Composition
Classroom**

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Hear Together Eyes; Write Together Heart:

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Classroom

Using spatial language to construct structural discourse often results in sentence structures similar to the title of this article, "Hear Together Eyes; Write Together Heart," which is what a signer of American Sign Language (ASL or Ameslan) might sign to communicate "Hearing with the Eyes; Writing with the Heart." ASL is a spatial language, in which meaning is conveyed not through words, but signs. It evolved separately from English (its closest relative is not English, but FSL, or French Sign Language) and uses its own grammar and syntax rather than English structure and orthography. Congenitally deaf signers who have never been exposed to English structure experience special difficulties when attempting to translate the spatial concepts of ASL into written English discourse. When evaluating the work of students whose native language is spatial and semiotic, composition teachers must avoid being what Marjorie Siegel calls "verbocentric" (vi), since congenitally deaf students are, in effect, learning to write in a language completely foreign to them in structure, syntax, and grammar.

In the October, 1989, issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, Shannon Brownlee writes that "the average deaf child emerges from high school barely able to read above a third-grade level" (86). In his book *Ameslan* ASL linguist Louie J. Fant, Jr. is slightly more optimistic, placing the average deaf

adult at a fifth or sixth grade level of English cognition (v). Betty Alexander Brown, an audiologist with the Michigan School for the Deaf (MSD) in Flint, Michigan, estimates that MSD's students can reach as high as an eighth grade reading and composition level in English, although this is definitely the exception rather than the rule. Regardless of where experts place congenitally deaf signers, the message is the same. As Fant writes, "for the typical deaf person, English is a second language, a foreign language" (v). This is made poignantly clear by Shanny Mow, who describes growing up deaf in a family where no one spoke his language.

You are left out of the dinner table conversation.

It is called mental isolation. While everyone else is talking and laughing, you are as far away as a lone Arab on a desert that stretches along every horizon. . . You thirst for connection. You suffocate inside but you cannot tell anyone of this horrible feeling. You do not know how to. You get the impression nobody understands or cares . . . You are not granted even the illusion of participation . . .

You are expected to spend fifteen years in the straitjacket of speech training and lipreading . . . your parents never bother to put in an hour a day to learn sign language or some part of it. One hour of

twenty-four that can change a life time for you.

(Sacks 117-118)

Keeping in mind that English is a foreign language to the congenitally deaf, it should come as no surprise when specific erroneous structural patterns repeat themselves in the compositions of deaf students. The students are, in fact, writing spatially rather than structurally.

It is this distinctive use of space which gives ASL its meaning. To sign the word "house," for example, the signer of ASL presses the fingertips of the right hand to those of the left hand to form a pointed roof. The sign is logical and spatial. By repeating the sign for "house" and moving it in a small circle, the meaning of the sign changes. Houses in a circle denote a "city" or "village" in ASL. The repetition of the sign is an ASL technique known as "reduplication," which is a number indicator. Reduplicating the sign for "car" many times in a row, for example, might indicate many cars lined up in a parking lot. The circular motion, or "sweep" also indicates plurality. Sweeps can be circular, horizontal, or vertical, depending upon the signer's context and intent. Spatially, the change in meaning between "house" and "city" is a logical progression for the signer. The spatially indicated progression in meaning is a common element in ASL "grammar." When "Lisa," a 7th grade MSD student writes "Maybe my family will go to rode into the biggest [sic] sand," she is considering the possibility of a family trip to see the desert. The sign for "sand," combined with "biggest," takes on the meaning of beach, dune, or

desert, depending on the signer's context. Structurally, a speaker of English knows that a few houses in a circle do not necessarily constitute a city any more than a large sand pile constitutes a desert. Once these signs are understood *conceptually*, however, a native English speaker can comprehend the meaning in the writing of a native ASL signer despite the syntactical differences between the two languages.

In past studies of ASL, linguists have often failed to differentiate between language and speech. While ASL is, in fact, a language with its own syntax and structure, it has no spoken or written counterpart because it is, after all, a *signed* language. One difficulty which arises for the native ASL signer stems from the fact that, when learning English as a second language, the student must in effect *use* English to *learn* English and its orthography. The simplest unit with which we can begin study of a language other than our own is the word. The word is in the middle of the morphological system of a language which itself is midway between the spoken (phonological) and the signed (semiotic) systems (Trager 10). The sign is the element within a spatial language which corresponds to the word in a spoken language. Signs in ASL are given "glosses" which identify them by name to non-native signers. The native signer knows, from the space used by the sender and the context of the message, that the sign described previously indicates "house." The knowledge is passed on conceptually. English speakers identify one sign as "house," and the duplicated, circular-swept sign as "city," but these terms--glosses--merely

serve to identify the signs to English-speakers by assigning words to those signs. ASL linguists and observers discuss sign language elements as *signs*, not as *words*, whether explaining the context of their use, describing their appearance, or glossing their meaning.

Fant (40) gives a vivid example of the confusion which may result when signed sentences are directly translated to English using ASL structure with English glosses. To the average reader, the sentence "Long time ago sentence movie best" seems confusing at best. Keeping in mind, however, that to a deaf person all movies are silent, the phrase "sentence movie" takes on a more logical meaning. Silent films are accompanied by occasional texts, differentiating them from other films for the deaf viewer. A "sentence movie" then becomes a silent film. The sign which is glossed as "long time ago" in English can also mean "old" in this context. When the signer is signing within her own personal space, the spatiality of the message makes clear to the receiver that the signer refers to her own personal likes and dislikes. She is known as the "present referent" because she has not used a tense indicator, and the receiver knows that she is referring to herself because she has not used a space indicator (usually a point) to show that she is speaking about someone else. The sentence, as we can now see, translates as "I like old silent movies best." Without a working knowledge of English sentence structure, the student would write the sentence by translating the signs into their English glosses. Thus: "Long time ago sentence movie best."

Because ASL has a structure uniquely its own, it is important for instructors teaching composition to congenitally deaf students to remember that they are, in actuality, teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). Teachers reading the compositions of ASL students must view their students work structurally and syntactically, as ESL teachers as well as teachers of composition. Like deciphering a code or piecing together an intricate puzzle, the reading must be done textually, without prejudice, for often meaning is lost when teachers attempt student essay readings based solely upon their own knowledge of English syntax and structure. When the work of congenitally deaf students is evaluated in this way, it is not surprising that students reach only third to eighth grade levels of English reading and composition. When "Carol," an MSD seventh-grader, writes that she is sorry she "get a new brain," it can be clear only to a teacher with a basic understanding of ASL syntax and structure that "Carol" has merely "changed her mind."

Several methods have been used, with various degrees of success, in the teaching of English speech, reading, and composition to native signers of ASL. Those who use ASL have an additional system which employs distinctive hand configurations. Called "**fingerspelling**" or "**dactylology**," this system differs radically from ASL proper, for the manual configurations in fingerspelling represent alphabetic symbols. The relationship between using ASL • and fingerspelling with the manual alphabet is not exactly the same as

speaking English and writing English with the appropriate alphabetic symbols. While speaking, reading, and writing English are closely related, the relationship between signing ASL and fingerspelling is at best only superficial. Fingerspelling does not use ASL morphology; rather it serves to encode written or spoken English with a letter-by-letter series of handshapes, following conventional English orthography exactly and literally spelling out English words, phrases, and sentences with the fingers. The most obvious drawback of the fingerspelling method is the time element. Fingerspelling is time-consuming for the signer and exhausting for the receiver, who must pay close attention to every letter. Context may be lost by the time a sentence has been completed. The spatial flow and conceptualism of ASL are lost, and although a degree of precision is gained with the use of fingerspelling, it is slow and cumbersome to all but the most adept signers of the manual alphabet. Fingerspelling is often used as an aid to ASL and has been shown to be effective in educational settings (Wilbur 271). Although fingerspelling has been effective as an aid, used alone it does not solve the problem of teaching English orthography and syntax.

Cued Speech, though not a separate communication method, is similar to fingerspelling in that it is an aid to speech, but it has its disadvantages as well. Like the manual alphabet, Cued Speech employs a series of signs representing the sounds of spoken English. Cued Speech uses lip movements supplemented by manual cues to represent phonemes of the

English language. According to Wilbur, researchers have reported increased accuracy in speechreading (lipreading, oralism), greater vocabulary, and better intelligibility of students' speech when Cued Speech is employed in the classroom (273). A disadvantage of Cued Speech is that, like many of the oral methods which fail to recognize the difference between language and speech, it does not recognize a congenitally deaf student's unfamiliarity with English orthography.

Other alternative methods used by teachers are **Manually Coded English** (MCE) and **Simultaneous Communication** (Sim-com). MCE and Sim-com are closely related and use ASL signs combined with English structure and syntax. Developed to be taught and used in conjunction with speech, MCE reinforces English syntax and grammar by making them visible to the student. MCE uses more fingerspelling than traditional ASL and gives the signer more versatility in the forming of verb tenses and plurals. Sim-com includes speechreading and, most importantly, simultaneous speaking and signing, as additional aids in comprehension. (Sim-com gained some familiarity among the general public in Paramount's 1987 film, *Children of a Lesser God*) Although Brownlee says that MCE, in practice, "has proved only marginally better than oralism" (88), deaf students at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., are successfully using the more intricate Sim-com to complete both undergraduate and graduate level courses requiring extensive reading and writing in English. Not all of Gallaudet's students are congenitally

deaf, however, and a number of them, while severely hearing-impaired, may not be completely deaf or may have lost their hearing after some exposure to spoken English.

Signing Exact English (SEE) also uses a number of traditional ASL signs but differs from ASL in that every nuance of English speech is added. Rather than depending upon word order, context, sweeping, and reduplication, SEE has its own signs for word endings, prefixes, suffixes, verb tenses, and plurals. SEE also has its own set of signed morphemes. SEE, as the name implies, enables the signer to sign exact English as it is read, written, and spoken, but like Cued Speech, it is difficult to learn for a student unfamiliar with English structure and syntax. A student familiar only with ASL might write, as did "Joe," a seventh-grader at MSD, "I am finish to go to the Cedar Point with Pam's family but my feet get hurt because too long walk around." In "Joe's" composition, writing the verb "finish," combined with the infinitive "to go," indicates that the sentence following will be in the past tense, just as signing "finish" indicates a past tense when signed with a verb at the beginning of an ASL sentence. Theoretically, SEE alleviates such structural problems by familiarizing the student with exact English, but often tenses and word endings are confused because the student has no aural sense of the English language. Realizing that she needs a past tense, ninth-grader "Kim" writes "I was start at summer school," which is little different than the traditional ASL method of signing "I finish start" to indicate "I started."

Although she has created a variation of her familiar ASL syntax by attempting to use the SEE method of forming a past tense, "Kim" has not succeeded in actually signing exact English because she has neither heard nor can she conceptualize "I started" when she knows she means "I finish start." She compromises by forming a past tense of the verb "to be" and uses the syntax familiar to her from her native ASL.

The preceding methods for teaching English to native signers of ASL all share a common prejudice. Unlike ESL methods for foreign students learning English, the methods for teaching ASL to the congenitally deaf treat the student's native language as a type of substandard English rather than as a linguistically sound, logical, intricately structured language in its own right. Again, the difference between speech and language seems to be ignored, but linguists are beginning to recognize this tendency as an ill-directed one. In 1989, the Modern Language Association recognized ASL as an "official" language, a decision which both legitimizes the study of ASL structure and syntax apart from that of English and recognizes the dissimilarities as well as the similarities between language and speech. Major universities across the United States and Canada, including Washington University in St. Louis and Georgetown University in Washington, DC, are setting new precedents in language and literature programs by accepting their students' requests to accept ASL as a foreign language requirement in their graduate programs. Recent publications such as Oliver Sacks's *Seeing Voices*, author/journalist

Henry Kisor's *What's That Pig Outdoors?*, and deaf author Douglas Bullard's *Islay* provide general audiences with new insights into the world of deafness. Bullard's book is especially significant in its "attempt to catch the distinctive perceptions, the stream of consciousness, the inner speech of those who sign" (Sacks 4). Researchers at Gallaudet University are developing computer software based on programs used by students in foreign language laboratories across the country. The software will provide grammar checks and automatic sentence parsing based on the differences between ASL syntax and English syntax. This new linguistic awareness of ASL reflects a trend toward interdisciplinary study and creates a vast number of possibilities for scholarship and discovery, but most importantly, it can allow us, finally, to see the voices of a long-silent minority.

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